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ABSTRACT

Numerous critics have repeatedly called for the use of curricular materials drawn from the learner's everyday world, and for many of today's students, one valuable source is the lyrics of contemporary rap music. In first-year writing courses at Michigan State University, the words to one rap song, "You Must Learn" by the group Boogie Down Productions, have been used with some success. Four student responses to the text of the song demonstrate that students are capable of conceiving more or less "successful readings" of the song. One student sees the song as an attack on traditional middle-class, white-based schooling. Another student picks up on one of the song's points, the traditional curriculum's insult to a black mentality. Another student notices the complaint about the repression of black history, while the fourth student notes that the failing student in the song is labelled as rebellious. A final example illustrates a less successful response to the song in which the student inserts her own points of view rather than identifying those of the lyrics. Rather than dismiss this last student response, however, the teacher should try to discover what motivates it. David Bartholomae has conceptualized methods by which teachers can interpret such responses. Moving beyond Bartholomae's concept, the paper states that such students can be seen as "brainwashed" by dominant ideologies which repress rebellion. These students must be trained to operate in academic discourse models. In short, English teachers cannot evade the critical study of ideologies. (HB)

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Rap Music and the First-Year Writing Curriculum

by Philip Justin Frisk
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March 1992

For a number of years now I have been in the habit of asking my first year composition classes to bring in the words to a popular song they think worthy of being discussed and written about in a college classroom. (The only limit I put on this assignment is that I will sometimes insist that it not be a love song). What I got was mostly rock lyrics.

Then three years ago, I began teaching in what's called DWLP, the Developmental Level Writing Program at Michigan State University. This is a program for underprepared first year college students and its clientele consists in large portion of young African-Americans, who come from the Detroit area. Recently, then, in response to my assignment--bring in the words to a popular song--I have been getting a number of rap lyrics by black groups.

The first point which I would like to make is one which has already been made by a whole range of curriculum theorists, who advocate developing a curriculum around the expressed interests and choices of the students themselves. Neil Postman and Michael Apple, among others, have repeatedly called for the use of curricular materials drawn from the culture of the learners'everyday life. They argue that it is sound educational practice to make use of some popular culture materials--tv shows, Hollywwod films, MTV videos, newspaper editorials, the words to popular music, etc--sound educational practice for a number of reasons: (one) the students like these materials and they are often on equal ground here with the professor in that they know as much as he or she does about them and are equally, if not more, adept at discussing them. (Two): It grounds the curriculum in the students' own experience in the here and now. Such texts exert a powerful, materialist force in their lives and in the lives of millions of their peers. Such a force ought not to be ignored or go unexamined in the process of education. The counter-argument that these materials are already too much with

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us only serves to make the point that they ought to be examined critically. And (four) students who are given some responsibility for the choice of curricular materials are less inclined to unthinkingly resist out of hand those selected by the teacher. In other words, both teacher and learners have some say in the selection of material for study in the classroom.

Please don't misunderstand me however. I am not advocating an uncritical accommodation to popular culture. I don't endorse what I understand to be the school of popular culture studies deriving from the mediations of Marshal McLuhan, that school which simply focuses on the positive rather than the negative aspect of what McQuade and Atwan accept as the 'common culture' of commercial producers and consumers.

I am certainly in favor, though, of introducing materials from popular culture into the humanities curriculum. In fact I would begin with them, following Dewey's idea that pedagogical practices ought to begin with the contemporaneous and experiential and then in later (more advanced) stages move toward the abstractly conceptual and the historically remote. Thus, I follow Ira Shor's formula: Traditional educational practice is upside down and backwards, he says, because it privileges the scholastic and the canonical over the dialogic and experiential, Ira Shor, in my view the leading exponent of Paul Freire's so-called "critical pedagogy" as adapted to writing instruction in the US.

"You Must Learn": a specific example

For the rest of this paper I'd like to give a report on how I've used the words to one rap song--"You Must Learn" by a rapper who calls himself KRS-ONE from the rap group Boogie Down Productions. To begin, I'd like to look at a set of four student responses to the text of the song, responses, which in my role as English teacher I consider more or less "successful readings" of the text (though not of course without problems). I want to use these four "successful" readings as take-off points for my analysis of the text of the song. Then, I'd like to discuss an example of a reading of the song which I consider less "successful," and give some reasons why I think the respondent--Tanya--has produced such a non-academic reading (with help from the theories of Paul Freire and David Bartholomae). Last, I offer my own ideological

critique of the song, to say, in other words, what I find of value and what I find to be backward in it--but first the text of the song:

You Must Learn (Boogie Down Productions -- KRS-One)

[Prologue]
Yo, Chris, what you doing out of school?
Yo, man, they just suspended me, McBoo
Were they suspending the teacher?
Yeah, man, I'm getting so sick of this, they teaching us about nothing, man; you know what the bottom line is for black people out here; it's quite simple--"You Must Learn!"

[Begin rap]
It's calm, yet wild, the style that I speak;
Just deal with facts and you will never get weak
In the heart; in fact you'll start to illuminate
Knowledge to others in a song, let me demonstrate
The force of knowledge, knowledge reigns supreme
the ignorant is [unintelligible--ripped to the rings (?)]

What do you mean when you say
I'm rebellious -- 'cause I don't accept
everything that you're telling us
what you are selling us? The creator dwells in us,
I sit in your unknowing class while you're failing us
I failed your class 'cause I ain't with your reasoning.
You try to make me you by seasoning;
Pump my mind with "See Jane run."
"See John walk" in a hardcore New York?
Come on now, that's like a chocolate cow
It doesn't exist no way, no how.

It seems to me that in a school that's ebony,
African history should be pumped up steadily
--but it's not, and this has got to stop.
"See spot run? Run get spot?"
Insulting, to a black mentality,
a black way of life or a jet black family
so I include with one concern
that "You must learn."

I believe that if you are teaching history
deal with straight-up facts, no mystery.
Teach the student what needs to be taught
- 'cause black and white kids both take shorts
When one doesn't know about the other one's culture
ignornance swoops down like a vulture.
'cause you don't know that you ain't just a janitor
no one told you about Benjamin Banneker
a brilliant black man who created the almanac
can't you see what KRS is coming at?
With Eli Whitney, Hali Salasi,
Granville Woods made the walkie-talkie
Louis Latimer improved on Edison,
Charles Drew did a lot for medicine
Garette Morgan made the traffic light
Harriet Tubman freed the slaves at night
Madame C.J. Walker made the straightening comb
but you won't know this, if you weren't shown
the point I'm getting at, it might be harsh
is we're just walking around brainwashed
see what I'm saying is not to "diss a man"
we need the '89 school system
One that caters to a black return
because you must learn.

Now, let me turn to the first four student responses to this song, all of them written by black students in my developmental course. My purpose in presenting these is to demonstrate what good use these students can put this rap song to, even though it is of course a commercial product, produced and disseminated by the record industry for the less than noble purpose of making itself lots of money.

Stephen sees the song as an attack on traditional middle-class, white-based schooling and agrees with what he sees as the song's argument that "African history should be taught more in school."

Stephen

> In the song "You Must Learn," KRS-One attacks the present school system, an he argues that Africa history should be taught more in school. He says that knowledge is a force and the key to strength.
>
> The lyrics of the song are written as if KRS-One is speaking to the white leaders of education. He claims that

> the education system is set up for a white society, and it is not effective and beneficial to blacks. I believe he is suggesting that if blacks want to be successful, they have to conform to whites' standard of living.
>
> KRS-One says that too much history is left as a mystery. Blacks and whites both lack knowledge of the straight-up facts. He cites pieces of history: Benjamin Banneker, Eli Whitney, Hali Salasi, Granville Woods, Louis Latimer, Charles Drew, Garette Morgan, Harriet Tubman, and Madame CJ Walker were all inventors and freedom fighters. Many of the things he cites are overlooked in the history books. He says that we're brainwashed. He concludes by saying that there is a need for a reformed school system.

For Stephen schooling is race-biased, set up for whites only, and works, for the most part, against blacks. "I believe," Stephen writes, "[KRS-ONE] is suggesting that if blacks want to be successful, they have to conform to whites' standard of living."

Thus, knowledge of black history is conceptualized as a defense against the ridicule of whites. In "Learn," KRS-ONE argues that one's real status as a member of a brilliant and noble race replete with its own scientists, inventors, freedom fighters, etc. cannot be realized without knowledge of this aspect of black history. Yet there is another way in which knowledge is power too.....school knowledge as a way up and out.

One of the pleasures of teaching young African-Americans is that they do usually have a great deal of respect for what we teachers also revere highly--namely, school knowledge. We members of the professional middle class owe our privileged positions at least in part to our having acquired that school knowledge necessary to become credentialed and get the kind of job with a middle-class life-style. African-American first-year students know the necessity of this too. The route through college and the professions, via the acquisition of advanced literacy, is often a very important way (in some cases the only way) for them to move up the socio-economic ladder.

Positivist Historiography

Less happily in my opinion, Steven seems to buy into the dichotomy the song sets up between history taught in school as a racist weapon used to mystify blacks about their own background, achievements and contributions, on the one hand, and history

as an objective "set of straight-up facts," on the other. As an instance of how the teaching of history in school has neglected some no nonsense "facts" of black history, the song gives us a list of not very well known--in fact, repressed--names of black scientists, inventors, and freedom fighters. But what exactly is the "straight-up fact" in all this? That these people existed? That their names have been repressed from American history? That, if these names were better known, it would somehow be better for blacks? That it would be much better? For me, an even more important "fact" (I'd call it) is that the reason there are so few names among the ranks of black scientists and so forth is that blacks have been systematically excluded from acquiring the necessary expertise to make breakthroughs in these fields. No, the straight up facts theory of history is just another name for what Marxists call the one damn thing after another theory of history and is itself a mystification. History is <u>not</u> the million leaves of discrete facts floating on the river of time.

Next, another respondent, Victoria, picks up on what I take to be one of the strongest moments of the song, when it speaks of the traditional curriculum's <u>insult</u> to a black mentality. Victoria writes, "He is saying that in school it is insulting our race, because they teach us about story book fairy tales and things that are not true, when they should be teaching us something about ourselves."

> Victoria
>
> This song by KRS is about the history of black. This is the education of the children he says that if you're going to teach history teach all sides and cultures. Knowledge comes from knowing and how can you have knowledge if you don't know each other's history. He is saying that in school it is insulting our race, because they teach us about story book fairy tales and things that are not true, when they should be teaching us something about ourselves. Then he goes on in his rap to teach about some famous black inventors. KRS One is a good rap group. I think they have something good and should keep up their rap.

Indeed, the see-Jane-run curriculum--the sanitized 1950's white-picket-fence-move-to-the-suburbs kind of curriculum--is "insulting to a jet black family." I think that KRS-ONE's rearticulation of the word family is especially effective in this context. He takes a word which has been strongly appropriated by the New Right with its rhetoric about preserving family values--along with those of course of god and country--and reappropriates this word with its powerful emotional overtones--for the sake of black opposition to white, middle class hegemony over the curriculum.

Another student-respondent, Jase, also picks up on the complaint about the repression of black history. And as he rearticulates what he sees as the song's concern about the repression of black history, his language becomes quite biting: "Oh, yes, we will learn about all of the white people who did for this world and also the bad ones. But in history items we will learn very little--and I mean very little--about black history and what they did for this world." Fair enough. Black history has been repressed, probably because, among other reasons, it bears too many (what Henry Giroux calls) dangerous memories....

> Jase
>
> What I think KRS-One is trying to get across to everyone is that you have to learn your culture and others' also to get along. In the classroom we are not being taught what we should be taught. Oh, yes, we will learn about all of the white people who did for this world and also the bad ones. But in history items we will learn very little--and I mean very little--about black history and what they did for this world. But they can't hold us back, because we will find out one way or another.
>
> Each culture must learn the other one's culture. That is a must. And at the beginning of the song, they had suspended the teacher. That is so real, the schools suspended the teacher that only wanted to teach black history. Don't get me wrong, it's not in all schools. Some of us need to wake up and stop being brainwashed.

.... and yet, in my way of thinking, there is a terrible danger too in construing history, as Jase seems to want to do, as exclusively race based. For example: in Jase's next sentence, there is, I think, an echo of an album title by the group Public Enemy (a black nationalist rap group somewhat associated with Louis Farrakhan and somewhat tainted by allegations of anti-semitism, whose best known album is called <u>It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back</u>). Jase writes, "But they can't hold us back, because we will find out one way or another."

I am grateful for Jase in clearing up for me what was happening at the beginning of the rap--in the conversation going on before the rap begins actually, "the prologue," as I've labeled it on

the copy of the text you have. It seems that KRS-One, lyricist, group leader, and main rapper for BDP, had been employed as a history teacher in one of the local schools (one of the Brooklyn schools perhaps, since that's where the group's from), and had been "suspended" (using the same word that's used when students are disciplined by being kicked out of school for a while, giving them the opportunity to think about what kind of economic future is in store for them if they aren't allowed to finish high school). [By the way, according to recent University of Michigan study conducted by education professor Charles Vergon, "about 102, 000 of Michigan's 1.5 million elementary and secondary school students were suspended in 1986. Michigan's suspension rate of 7 percent compares with 5 percent nationwide" (Lansing State Journal, Aug 27, 1990: 5B)]. Jase's comment on the song: "That is so real, the schools suspended the teacher that only wanted to teach black history."

It's Jessica however who mentions the failing student, who is stigmatized as "rebellious." "Rebellious," writes Jessica, "because he doesn't accept the white way of life, and because they don't control him. He sits in their class and knows nothing about what they are teaching him. They failed him because he wasn't with their reasoning. They try to manipulate him by 'seasoning' him, adding in the additives to make him a preservative."

Her point is of course well-taken. The black urban student with a working- or under-class background is going to be alienated beyond hope in many (if not most) traditional white middle-class classrooms. It's almost given that he will fail, most likely because he is supposed to fail. Andre Gorz has written that "schools must keep producing a proportion of failures--about two thirds in western Europe versus about one third in the US--so as to prevent [young people] from acquiring skills and knowledge that would make them 'unfit' for the low grade jobs" (146) and contribute to what another critic, Svi Shapiro, has called the overproduction of overaspirerers.

> Jessica
>
> KRS One is talking about how schools and society try to change your way of thinking.
>
> He feels that teachers are teaching us about nothing, meaning that they don't teach us about the blacks but the whites and that is not going to help us blacks. To him knowledge is strong. If you have knowledge about the black history you can never be weak.
>
> Whites call him rebellious because he don't accept the white way of life, and because they don't control him. He

sits in their class and knows nothing about what they are teaching him. They failed him because he wasn't with their reasoning. They try to manipulate him by "seasoning" him, adding in the additives to make him a preservative. They teach us, See Jane walk; see, Jon run. It's like a chocolate cow. There aren't any white people walking the streets of New York.

He believes that if you're teaching history you should deal with the facts and the only facts. It shouldn't be a mystery. Teach the black student what needs to be taught. Because of the miseducation, black and white kids fight, because one doesn't know about the other's background; ignorance damages friendships and would've-been friendships. Because the white society has kept our history from us, we don't know what our families or our ancestors did. Most of what we have today originated from black people. They don't tell us that; they tell us that whites did it without the help of blacks.

He ends it with the saying that the school system of 1989 must teach the blacks what they need to know, meaning our background. Teach us what we need to know instead of leaving us brainwashed about who we really are!

Jessica: "Because the white society has kept our history from us, we don't know what our families or our ancestors did. Most of what we have today originated from black people. They don't tell us that; they tell us that whites did it without the help of blacks."

It's hard to know how to respond to the claim that most of what we have today originated with black people. I do know that it is a claim which I am finding made rather frequently by African-Americans (at least those I contact in class). One would have to know more about what is actually being claimed here, before committing oneself to serious commentary, but one can see a certain legitimacy to the claim, viewed from the perspective of the extent to which the slave trade and the unpaid labor of slaves created the capital upon which the industrial revolution was launched (and James Boggs has written persuasively on this subject).

There does however seem to be another aspect to these claims which is much less rational in that it's based on religious myth, the story of the origin of evil or the Fall of Man. Permit me to make something of a detour here in order to discuss in more

detail what I take to be the ideology of black nationalism, at least as it is expressed by the well-known rap group Public Enemy.

Party for Your Right to Fight (Public Enemy)

Power, Equality
And we're out to get it,
I know some of you ain't wit' it
This party started right in '66
With a pro-Black radical mix
Then at the hour of twelve
Some force cut the power
And emerged from hell
It was your so-called government
That made this occur
Like the grafted devils they were

J. Edgar Hoover, and he coulda proved to ya,
He had King and X set up
Also the party with Newton, Cleaver and Seale.
He ended--so get up
Time to get 'em back--You got it
Get back on the track--You got it
Word from the honorable Elijah Muhammad
Know who you are to be Black
To those that disagree, it causes static
For the original Black Asiatic man
Cream of the earth
And was the first
And some devils prevent this from being known
But you check out the books they own.
Even Masons they know it
But refuse to show it--Yo
But it's proven and fact,
And it takes a nation of millions
To hold us back.

Racism exists. It seems to me that one can either blame its existence among many, perhaps most, white people on white dpeople for being white or one can blame it on a social system in which white people have been conditioned into being racist. If one blames it on white people in and of themselves, then one has to say that there is something about their skin color that allows them to hate and oppress people of color. This seems to me what this song by Public Enemy is saying. It's saything that

having a white skin means that the person is evil, a devil, someone who, out of envy and fear, has usurped the birthright of primary man, the Asiatic Black, who, according to the Masons and the possessors of books of esoteric knowledge of origins, ruled the earth sometime back when everything was harmonious, peaceful and whole (as in The Garden of Eden). But then came the devil, only it wasn't in the form of a snake, but in the form of white men, who used their evil powers and took possession of the earth and plunged it into sin and darkness. The white man is therefore the devil. It is just a manner of black and white. Black is good; white, evil.

This, as far as I can understand, is the basic teaching of Louis Farrakhan, heir to Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, the doctrine of Black Nationalism and the Nation of Islam. It is in my opinion a religious ideology, the reverse of the doctrine of white supremacy, best seen and understood as a reaction formation to it. In its kinder, gentler forms, it sees racism in white people as a psychological flaw or character disorder.

Another way to explain racism is to see it as originating at about the same time as capitalism, and as indeed caused by capitalism. Racism or the ideology of white supremacy grew out of the need to rationalize chattel slavery, the superprofits from which gave rise to the massive accumulation of capital which later fueled the industrial revolution, in which (under a different form) we are of course still living. These superprofits came from the slave trade itself and from the tremendous amounts of surplus value extracted from the labor of slaves in the cotton, tobacco and rice fields of the South. This is James Boggs' argument and he goes on to point out that what makes racism so entrenched in the American system, even today, long after the end of slavery, is that every white American has a stake in a system which has enabled him or her to do well economically at the expense of black Americans.

Getting back to the students' comments on the rap lyric--"You nMust Learn"--I want to emphasize the student's critical spirit. I'm not sure to what extent the song itself has encouraged them to adopt and develop this critical spirit, perhaps it was already quite this fully active. I do think however that the song has supported a critical discourse, if any of the respondents wished to rearticulate it, as many of my students did. One of the hallmarks of this critical thinking is a concern with brainwashing, as we shall see.

Up till now I have been paraphrasing, quoting and commenting upon readings--those of Jase, Victoria, Stephen, and Jessica-- which I have been presenting as more or less successful readings of the rap "You Must Learn." Let me turn now to a less successful reading, I think, from an academic standpoint anyway--Tanya's. Tanya's response to the song follows the form of the writing assignment, which I gave them. Thus, it in two parts: the first part, a paraphrase of the song; and the second, a (more or less personal) commentary.

> Tanya's Paraphrase
>
> I think the poem "You Must Learn" means that every student in school should learn more about history instead of learning about other cultures. I think if each student learns about African-American history students will know where they came from. Also the poem states "I believe that if you are teaching history deal with spright-up facts, no mystery." I think this means that most of the students don't know black leaders such as Benjamin Banneker, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King. Most of the students just ignore the black leaders. Students don't realize that we are children of tomorrow and we should know a lot about black leaders that put their lives on the line for us to be successful in life. Students should try to get the best education they can get because we are the future of tomorrow. Students

don't realize that all the black leaders had to struggle to get a good education. But today students have the right to get an education without the struggle. I think one day students will realize that education is the most important thing in life.

[Tanya's] commentary on this song.

When I first read this poem I remembered back when I used to attend middle school. The teacher used to tell the students that black people will never be successful in life because most of the students didn't attend school. So I thought why am I attending school? I blame some of the teachers that so many students drop out of school.

Then when I attended high school, there was a lot of different students who were dealing drugs in school and a lot of teenagers had kids. My mother and my English teacher influenced me to get a good education. My mother told me the only way I was going to be successful in life was to learn as much as I can because if it wasn't for my mother I don't think I would be attending college today. I believe there are so many high school drop-outs because in the environment the students came from some parents didn't finish high school, so many students followed the footsteps of the parents. I found out some teachers discourage the students by telling them that all they would do is just work at a fast-food restaurant. Then the students think, Well, maybe I should work there instead of getting the best education. I think this poem "You Must Learn" is a very good poem because first it starts off [saying] that Chris was suspended from school; then it goes into, Students, you must learn. I think if every student had a [word?] mind that they can be taught to be students who will attend college.

The gist of Tanya's paraphrase, her rearticulation of the rap piece, is that it's mostly the <u>students themselves</u> who are to blame for problems with schooling in the black community. They sell or use drugs; they get pregnant; they drop out (though this is often because their parents are poor role models, having dropped out of school themselves), and they don't respect their elders. Young blacks, according to this discourse, don't respect those elder black leaders who had to struggle to get their own education and in doing so have won the right of an education for all black youth. Thus, young blacks are doubly guilty: guilty not only for not honoring those who took part in this struggle but also--and in this even more guilty perhaps-- for not taking full

advantage of their own right to an education, purchased for them by the struggles and sacrifices of those very elders for whom the black youth of today evidence such little regard.

Tanya has domesticated the text of the rap song. In her reading, the text, instead of being a political counter-attack against the symbolic violence of a curriculum which is "insulting to a jet black family" becomes an occasion for her to speak the language of parents, who scold their children away from the danger of early unmarried pregnancies, away from the temptation to drop out of school or to take drugs.

However, rather than dismiss Tanya's reading as "completely off the wall" and deserving of a low grade, let me ask myself what might have motivated it? The work of David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky is helpful here. Let me take the time to paraphrase some of his theoretical contributions from the essay "Wanderings, Misreading, Miswriting, Misunderstandings" (from Only Connect, edited by Thomas Newkirk, Boynton/Cook, 1986).

David Bartholomae has specialized in studying (1) the various ways in which freshman writing students move to translate the text of an other into their own discourse, (2) what rationales they employ to authorize such a move, and (3) what "their own discourse" consists of.

In Batholomae's reasoning, when the 18 year old freshman student is asked to respond in writing to some reading or other which has been assigned by the professor, the student may feel intimidated. She is faced with the daunting and difficult task of coming up with the hutzpah to displace the authority of the published text with one of her own composition. Moreover, there is a lot riding on whether she can successful negotiate this move. Let me parody an imaginary student's thoughts as follows: This teacher has got to accept what I do. If she doesn't, I've had it, for we all know what that means for my future economic situation in this economy, where, as they say, in a few years, you'll need a BA just to pump gas.

To use Bartholomae's language, Tanya in her essay "is trying to find a place of authority, a place to enable an utterance that can stand next to [KRS-One's], by putting [herself] within the language that speaks the received wisdom of the community" (108).

Or, put another way, Tanya establishes her right to speak by taking as her own "a general, cultural commonplace" (104), that is, a cultural commonplace of what she takes to be the adult community of readers (104). Bartholomae defines cultural commonplace as follows: "A 'commonplace' is a culturally or institutionally authorized concept or statement that carries with it is own necessary elaboration. We all use commonplaces to orient ourselves in the world; the proved point of reference and a set of 'prearticulated' explanations that are readily available to organize and interpret experience" ("Inventing the University" from When a Writer Can't Write. New York and London: Guilford Press, 1985: 137-38). Elsewhere Bartholomae remarks, "The power of a commonplace has little to do...with whether it rings true to experience or not. It provides a set of terms within which one can control difficult or problematic information and its power to do so determines its merit ("Wanderings" 109)." A contemporaneous example which occurs to me is "Support the troops."

I think we can agree with Bartholomae when he conceptualizes the reader as divided into two parts: one part is subjective and experiences personal feelings, idiosyncratic perceptions and associations in the experience of reading. But there is another more "objective side" as well. According to Bartholomae, this other more objective side of the reading experience is defined and circumscribed by the understanding of what is expected of me as a reader in a situation in which I am required to perform a publicly acceptable reading of this text. If I am an 18 year old in college for the first time, wondering about what is expected of me as I attempt to negotiate this perilous crossing into adulthood or into the middle-class via this credentialing initiation, the question on my mind is, What do they expect me to say on this subject? What do adults say on this subject?

Thus, it's not so much that she herself thinks that the song is saying this--these scolding and guilting words to black youth (of which she herself is one)--but that these words occur to her as appropriate in this context, as her version of what grown-up people say on public occasions on the subject of blacks getting an education, as her version of what she thinks the teacher (not me personally so much as a representative figure for the authority of the institution of higher education) wants to hear or expects to hear.

I think that Tanya's mom is the most direct source of this discourse. Her mother and her teacher seem to have taken a close interest in Tayna's schooling, and I think her mother felt the need for this kind of cautionary discourse with Tanya. There are of course very real dangers and temptations facing young people today: young girls do get pregnant; drug abuse and drug dealing are widespread and there is indeed a very high school drop out rate, especially for urban blacks.

The Brainwashing thesis

Now, for the remainder of this paper, I want to take Batholomae's controlling concept of the cultural commonplace one step further and politicize it from the left. I want to show that what he identifies as commonplaces can also been seen as fragments of bourgeois ideology, which is to say that the "prearticulated" meanings of these so-called cultural commonplaces are those of the ruling class and serve its interests.

Another way to theorize this is to speak of the dominant ideology thesis or, more colloquially, of brainwashing. The dominant ideology thesis derives from Marx's observation in The Manifesto and elsewhere that the ruling ideas of society are always those of its ruling class. To put it into the song's own language--"We're just walking around brainwashed." This concept of ideological conditioning or brainwashing is also one which several other respondents in the class picked up and commented on. Jase wrote: "Some of us need to wake up and stop being brainwashed."

Tanya herself describes a kind of brainwashing performed on students by teachers who tell them over and over again that they will never amount to anything, telling them that in fact all they have to look forward to is a life of minimum-wage burger flipping. Jessica notes: "How schools and society try to change your way of thinking." She goes on to advise teachers to, "Teach us what we need to know instead of leaving us brainwashed about who we really are." One could interpret Jessica's observation as her variation of the dominant ideology thesis. The dominating group defines and stereotypes the subordinate group, the result of which is that many in the subordinate group may come to believe the stereotype themselves.

Now, it may be said that Tanya's rearticulation of cultural commonplaces are thmselves the product of brainwashing in that they do not serve her own interests--but rather those of her own class enemy. Let me explain this. Tanya begins with a distinction between learning about history and learning about other cultures, and she privileges learning one's racial history over learning about other cultures. She seems to be saying, in effect, that other cultures are okay but let's not put them over our own. Now, I don't find this in the song. The songs says,

Black and white kids both take shots
When one doesn't know about the other one's culture

However Tanya writes: "I think the poem 'You Must Learn' means that every student in school should learn more about history instead of learning about other cultures (emphasis added)." Thus, while I see the song as arguing for the teaching of black culture to white students, Tanya seems to interpret this passage as privileging black history over (what I take her to think of as) foreign cultures, such as Korean and Hispanic.

My guess is that her interpretation derives (in part) from African-American resentment against new immigrants. Many African-Americans perceive themselves on the losing side of the competition between them and the most recently arrived immigrants, especially of Hispanic and Korean descent. Many black Americans resent seeing new arrivals flourish economically, while their own much older and more evidently established American communities flounder in unemployment, educational backwardness, homelessness, and the many other ills attendant upon African--American poverty. (Some of the recent interracial troubles between Afro-Americans and Koreans in NYC is evidence for this.)

My guess is that Tanya is echoing a version of what I call Lee Iacocca chauvinism. Tanya is uncritically borrowing the xenophobic perspective of those segments of corporate America, automobile manufacturing, for example, which find themselves up against stiff foreign competition. If this is true, then Tanya's legitimate grievances against the immiseration of black America runs the risk of being appropriated by corporate America's interest in stirring up hostility against its foreign competitors.

I do not share Tanya's reading of the song. I think the song itself is putting most of the blame on an educational system whose Euro-centric curriculum denies the opportunity for learning that which is relevant to the black community. The force of the injunction "You must learn" is not to blame Afro-American students for resisting or rejecting the established curriculum (even to the extent of dropping out of school or getting themselves kicked out) but to emphasize the need for a counter-curriculum for Afro-Americans.

Thus, Tanya's discourse is very accommodating to the powers that be. To me, it blames the victim rather than the system and thereby may be seen to perpetuate the status quo. It reproduces the Joe Clark ideology, Ex-secretary of Education William Bennett's favorite ghetto teacher, replete with bullhorn and baseball bat, lionized by Reagan-Bush and made the subject of a full-length feature film, Lean On Me. It's Joe Clark's philosophy that black students have no one but themselves to blame if they don't succeed--not their teachers, their parents, or the system. Can one imagine a more blatant form of blaming the victim?

What's my responsibility in this? What should I try to do with Tanya?

In a word, help her to learn how to write academic discourse. I am not of course uncritically endorsing academic discourse as intrinsically worthy of emulation. Far from it. It's a form of hegemonic discourse, shot through with the politics of domination and hardly free from jargonnaire commonplaces of its own. It's just that one needs to learn and appropriate this form of discourse, but not simply so one may take one's place on a corporate ladder or otherwise fulfill the achievement ideology of the American dream.

One learns it in much the same spirit in which a speaker of a dialect of non-standard English must learn standard English or ought to learn it--, which is to say, critically.

Some final thoughts: The political implications of curriculum design are of course quite obvious. What gets taught can be a weapon against all subordinate groups. The song's example is the see-spot-run readers, and the point is clear: It's insulting to

blacks because it colonizes their experience and attempts to domesticate it (to use Freire's vocabulary) by substituting for the expression of their own reality in their own dialect a sanitized 1950's version of a suburban utopia, perhaps made even more insidiously utopian for the fact that the move to suburbia left blacks behind in the inner city. Such a curriculum is therefore not merely forgetful of black history but is actively exclusionary, in that like the move to the suburbs in the 50's, it constructs its identity from that act of exclusion.

MY CRITIQUE OF THE SONG

The song seems to overestimate the importance of including for study the names of Afro-American scientists, inventors, freedom fighters, etc., almost as if adding these names to ED Hirsh's list of cultural items for memorization might be enough. I think the curriculum could easily expand itself to make such an accommodation without modifying its essentially racist character. Such a curriculum might do more harm than good by implying that if these Afro-Americans could do it, fulfill the achievement ideology, then, if you don't, it's your fault. A realistic representation of black history would have to make clear how a racist system has worked to deny the vast majority of Afro-Americans the opportunity for a true education--as opposed to mere schooling.

Second: the song attempts a kind of ego-aggrandizing knowledge of the self as more than, say, a janitor, because of the achievements of others members of one's race. But it is hard to understand how it's progressive to teach a janitor or any other member of the lower echelons of the working class to become more satisfied with his or her lot because of one's racial identity, or, even more dubiously, in my opinion, because of some kind of transcendent religious identity--the idea that "the creator dwells in you."

That said, now let me praise BDP as one of the most politically aware of the rapidly proliferating numbers of rap groups, for many of whom the best that I can say is that they provide the popular pleasures of the oppressed, which, according to John Fiske in his excellent <u>Understanding Popular Culture</u> "must contain elements of the opposition, the evasive, the scandalous--and here one thinks of <u>2 Live Crew</u>--the offensive, the vulgar, the resistant (127).

In conclusion, I think rap ought to be made part of curriculum or, at least, not excluded ipso facto; even more importantly, the curriculum ought to consist of materials selected (at least in

part) by the learners themselves, and therefore will vary from one class to another, even if the classes are listed merely as different sections of the same course. Furthermore, ED Hirsh and others ought to be pressed to answer why his list of school knowledge--the knowledge, e.g., that Falstaff is fat--an item on his list of what every American needs to know--is so much more important than the knowledge developed by my students themselves responding critically to a text of their own choosing, which happens to be rap, but which nevertheless deals with the serious themes of education, brainwashing, curriculum design, racism, and the uses of history--themes drawn from their own everyday reality.

Finally, in my conceptualization or reconceptualization of student responses to the texts of mass culture, I look to identify those aspects of their responses which I cannot directly tie into a take-off point within the song. I do this following my rule of thumb that such material, which cannot be seen as deriving from the text, will usually reflect either personal associative material or, most importantly for my present purposes, will reflect the kind of received opinions which I wish to call ideological commonplaces.

My goal, then, is to deconstruct or to problematize these received opinions and ideas and the ideology in which they are enmeshed, "common sense ideologies" which they uncritically hold as not merely a set of false ideas or ideas which can be detached from their experience--but as "lived experience only partially understood" (Foreman's definition). It's this ideology, usually tenaciously and uncritically held, which I wish most to problematize, to get them to distance themselves from and to reconsider critically, with the aim to weakening its hold.

Thus, in my work, I try to emulate the practice of Ira Shor whose "critical pedagogy" is itself an attempt to emulate the work of Paolo Freire, the Brazilian educator who has been heavily influenced by existential marxism and liberation theology. As James Berlin argues (in his strongly politicized version of what I take to be Gerald Graff's call to "teach the conflicts"), we English teachers cannot evade the responsibility that one's pedagogy reflects an ideological commitment and that therefore the critical study of our own and other ideologies ought to be at the core of the curriculum as well.

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